



**PURPOSEFUL CHANGE:** Students head to class at the Charles R. Drew Charter School in Atlanta's East Lake neighborhood. The school is part of a neighborhood-revitalization effort in that community that is being seen as a national model. PAGE 12

## Jobs Plan Highlights Education

Obama Seeks \$60 Billion For Teachers, Renovations

By Alyson Klein

President Barack Obama is putting new money to save educators' jobs and help states refurbish aging school facilities at the center of a nearly \$450 billion plan to jump-start the sluggish economy.

But his plan—which calls for \$60 billion in new education spending—is sure to face hurdles in a politically polarized Washington where one house of Congress is controlled by Republicans wary of federal spending increases.

The proposals that the president unveiled in a Sept. 8 speech to Congress, including \$30 billion over two years to help preserve an estimated 280,000 teacher jobs, are certain to reignite arguments about whether the nearly \$100 billion for education in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 lived up to its economic and school improvement promises.

The president also is proposing \$25 billion over one year for school renovations, which he said could pay for makeovers of at least 35,000 schools.

Both proposals will likely face a rough legislative road. In 2009, President Obama had hoped to include a similar grant program in the ARRA's economic-stimulus package, but he was unable to persuade Congress to go along, even though Democrats held healthy majorities in both chambers. In 2010, the administration also struggled before winning approval of a \$10 billion package aimed at keep-

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## Rules Relaxed On Budget Cuts To Special Ed.

Advocates Fear an Erosion Of Students' Protections

By Nirvi Shah

New guidance from the U.S. Department of Education has put another chink in the once-solid armor protecting special education spending.

In the past, federal law was interpreted to mean that once a district set its special education budget, it could not be reduced permanently except for very specific reasons. The so-called maintenance-of-effort provision was built into special education spending rules to buffer students with disabilities from changes in services triggered by the ups and downs of public spending and politics.

One of the few exceptions to the maintenance-of-effort rule is when a district experiences an actual decrease in expenses, such as when an experienced, highly paid special education teacher retires or a high-needs student leaves a district. Cutting the special education budget for almost any other reason meant a district was running the risk of losing its share of federal funds.

But a letter to the National Asso-

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## New Groups Giving Teachers Alternative Voice

By Stephen Sawchuk

In times of great uncertainty for U.S. teachers, who speaks for them? The question is almost axiomatic in its simplicity, but the answer is far less clear-cut.

The teachers' unions remain the most visible, powerful, and probably the most important advocates for teachers. But over the past few years, a number of new efforts have sprung up purporting to give teachers a say in policy, and their emergence is extending discussions about

"teacher voice" in unexpected ways.

In general, the groups' origins, goals, and purposes remain diverse, and their work continues to evolve. Where the groups seem to converge, though, is that their members are gradually becoming involved in conversations about policy, ranging from teacher evaluation to seniority to professional development.

Groups include the Los Angeles-based NewTLA, which operates as a caucus within the city teachers' union, and the Educators 4 Excellence group

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Sara D. Davis for Education Week

## Latest Wave of STEM Schools Taps New Talent

By Erik W. Robelen  
Raleigh, N.C.

Few Americans may know about the Grand Challenges for Engineering—from making solar energy affordable to ensuring access to clean water—but the students at a new school on the campus of North Carolina State University are getting to know them firsthand.

The set of 21st-century challenges, devised by the National Academy of Engineering, serves as a frame and inspiration for the curriculum at this school, one of a relatively small but rapidly growing number of STEM-focused schools cropping up across the country.

At a time of heightened national attention

to improving education in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, the development of such schools has gained momentum as a strategy to boost knowledge and interest in the subjects.

While STEM schools historically have tended to target the top math and science students in a state or district, the new wave appears to have a broader reach, with many of the schools aimed especially at serving groups underrepresented in the STEM fields, such as African-American, Hispanic, female, and low-income students.

Just this academic year, new STEM schools have opened in a number of states, including

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Morgan Anthony, 14, inspects a topographic map at a STEM high school in Raleigh, N.C.

# New Guidance Allows Districts to Cut Special Ed. Spending

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ciation of State Directors of Special Education in June from the Education Department now says otherwise.

A district "is not obligated to expend at least the amount expended in the last fiscal year for which it met the maintenance-of-effort requirement. In other words, each year's [district] maintenance-of-effort obligation is based on the actual amount expended in the immediate prior fiscal year," wrote Melody Musgrove, the director of the office of special education programs.

That means that if districts lower their special education spending for any reason, whether or not it's because of the exceptions built into the law, the Education Department says it's now permissible to never resume spending at the previously higher level.

The shift has special education advocates worried.

"In essence, what the department has done by issuing this interpretation, they have created one more way in which [districts] can reduce their local spending, which is not articulated either in statute or regulation," said Candace Cortiella, who runs the website IDEA Money Watch, which tracks special education spending.

Last month, Kathleen B. Boundy, a co-director of the Center for Law and Education,

based in Boston, sent Ms. Musgrove and OSEP Deputy Director Ruth E. Ryder a letter challenging their new position about districts' responsibilities regarding special education spending. Ms. Boundy asked that the guidance be rescinded.

"This is illogical and is not consistent with the language of the statute. This is not a matter of interpretation, but a misreading or misapplication of the law," Ms. Boundy said. "Districts are required to maintain the level of special education expenditures from year to year based on a notion that costs rarely decrease, the population of eligible children is predictable, and Congress in granting ... funds for the education of children with disabilities mandated that these federal dollars were being used to pay for the excess costs of educating this vulnerable population of children, not as a substitute for local and state funding."

## Recession No Excuse

The Education Department said it is still reviewing Ms. Boundy's letter. But, in an Aug. 29 email, federal education officials said they think school districts' obligation to provide students with disabilities a free, appropriate education as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act will keep them from

cutting spending haphazardly.

"We have some confidence that [districts] will continue to provide the funding needed to meet the ... obligation," the email said. "Historically, because the cost of services has increased, most [dis-

**“Fairness dictates that all programs and populations share in the burden of cuts, rather than holding a single program exempt from the cuts.”**

SASHA PUDELSKI

American Association of School Administrators

tricts] have needed to provide at least as much funding as in the prior year to meet this obligation. It would not be appropriate for a [district] to reduce spending simply because of 'financially challenging times.'"

However, the American Association of School Administrators, in

Arlington, Va., estimates that 10 percent of the nation's districts will not be able to keep special education spending level this year, and 15 percent won't be able to do so next year.

"School administrators have been forced to cut to the bone when it comes to general education costs, but current IDEA [maintenance-of-effort] requirements prohibit them from making the same difficult cuts to special education," said Sasha Pudelski, a legislative specialist for the AASA.

"Fairness dictates that all programs and populations share in the burden of cuts, rather than holding a single program exempt from the cuts," she continued. "If the situation was reversed and special education budgets received all the cuts while general education students' budgets were left entirely intact, parents and school leaders would never stand for that."

Special education budgets haven't gone entirely untouched. Seven states—Alabama, Iowa, Kansas, New Jersey, Oregon, South Carolina, and West Virginia—have requested permission to cut spending on students with disabilities, citing unforeseen declines in financial resources—an option that had never been used by any state. Some have been granted their wishes.

"You can only protect this pot of

money so carefully for so long before people are going to be upset," said Nancy Reder, the deputy executive director for governmental relations for the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, in Alexandria, Va. Bill East, the executive director of the group, wrote the February letter to Ms. Musgrove that triggered the Education Department's informal guidance on reducing special education spending.

"At the same time," added Ms. Reder. "I don't want services for kids to be cut."

Part of the solution is more federal funds for special education, said Lindsay Jones, the senior director of policy and advocacy services for the Council for Exceptional Children, in Arlington, Va.

"CEC has long advocated for full funding for IDEA," Ms. Jones said. When the law was crafted, it allowed the federal government to contribute up to 40 percent of the cost of educating students with disabilities. The current contribution is 16.5 percent. Members of Congress have proposed bills to increase the share of federal spending on students with disabilities, but none has passed.

"Everybody is taking a magnifying glass to their budgets," Ms. Jones said. "But at the end of the day, these are individual services and there are lots of individualized needs for technology that are expensive."

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